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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a comparative case study designed to describe how the implementation of whole language, an educational philosophy influencing many of today's elementary schools, evolved in four school libraries in Virginia. The study examined the impact of whole language in terms of its effect on the library program and the librarian. The study also sought to understand the change agent role each librarian played during implementation of the philosophy. Specifically, the following questions were addressed: (1) What changes occurred in the knowledge, perceptions, practices, and beliefs of the librarians? (2) What changes did the librarians make in the library programs as a result of whole language? (3) What roles did the school librarians play during the implementation of whole language? and (4) How did the librarians feel about the whole language philosophy and its impact on the library program? Data collection techniques included participant observation; interviews with librarians, principals, and teachers; and examination of relevant documents. Findings indicated that the level of success each librarian experienced varied and was dependent on the culture of the school, principal support, the librarian's knowledge and interpersonal skills, the librarian's reaction to district level changes, and time. Recommendations are provided for practicing school librarians and library school educators. (Contains 31 references.) (Author/MES)

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The Impact of Whole Language on Four Elementary School Libraries

Results from a Comparative Case Study

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This paper reports the findings of a comparative case study designed to describe how the implementation of whole language, an educational philosophy influencing many of today's elementary schools, evolved in four school libraries in Virginia. The study examines the impact of whole language in terms of its effect on the library program and its effect on the librarian. The study also seeks to understand the change agent role each librarian played during implementation of the philosophy. It provides recommendations for practicing school librarians and library school educators.

Introduction

In the 1980s, the public and the educational community began to question the effectiveness of America's public schools, particularly their success in teaching students to read and write. Researchers, teacher educators, and practitioners began to seek more effective ways to teach literacy. The research generated by this national reading debate led many elementary schools to adopt a new philosophy of literacy instruction known as whole language.

The whole language philosophy emphasizes holistic, meaning-based literacy instruction. It supports teaching language and all its systems—semantics, syntax, and graphophonics—intact. Rather than being taught discrete decoding skills, children in whole language classrooms learn to read and write during the process of reading and writing. Teachers, acting as models and facilitators of literacy development, create literature rich classrooms in which children are encouraged to take risks, try new things, formulate hypotheses, self-correct, and work as a community of learners (Goodman, 1986; Smith, 1994; Routman, 1996).

Leaders in the school library field believe the implementation of whole language poses significant challenges for school librarians (Stanek, 1993; Haycock, 1988; Vandergrift, 1988b; Veatch, 1988). Haycock (1988, p. 19), describes whole language as "the greatest threat the school library profession has faced in years." He predicts that if school librarians continue to operate isolated scheduled classes and to act as unitary teachers, they risk the dissolution of the centralized school library.

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Research in the area of educational change also indicates that whole language will challenge the attitudes and skills of school librarians. According to Fullan (1982, p. 26), change, especially the implementation of an innovation, "represents a serious personal and collective experience characterized by ambivalence, uncertainty, loss, and anxiety." Individuals experiencing change have concerns about their adequacy to learn new skills and use new materials. They question how an innovation will benefit students, how it will affect them personally, and how it will alter the culture and structure of the school.

The purpose of this study is to understand how school librarians in four elementary schools responded to the implementation of whole language and to describe the philosophy's impact on the library program. It extended earlier research (Barlup, 1991; Hughes, 1993; Bishop & Blazek, 1994; Jones, 1994; Delgado et al., 1995) by using three theoretical lenses to analyze the data—whole language theory and practice, educational change theory, and change agent theory.

Research Base

The research on whole language provided a deeper understanding of the philosophy and the changes it creates in the organization and climate of the classroom, the resources teachers use, teacher behaviors, and student-teacher interactions (Goodman, 1986; Routman, 1991). Theories of planned educational change revealed the complexity and multidimensional nature of educational change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Herriot & Gross, 1979; House, 1979; Rosenblum & Louis, 1981; Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 1984; Hall & Hord, 1987; Sarason, 1996). Empirical data indicated that implementation of an innovation involves structural, political, psychological, cultural, environmental, and technological changes. Last, research on the role of change agents emphasized the important role change agents play in the successful initiation, implementation, and continuation of educational change, and described characteristics of successful change agents (Grossman, 1975; Shirk, 1978; Feehan, 1991; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Research Questions

Given four elementary schools in the process of implementing whole language, how did the implementation and continuation of the philosophy affect the library programs and the librarians in these schools? Specifically, this study addressed the following questions:

1. What changes occurred in the knowledge, perceptions, practices, and beliefs of the librarians?
2. What changes did the librarians make in the library programs as a result of whole language?
3. What roles did the school librarians play during the implementation of whole language?
4. How did the librarians feel about the whole language philosophy and its impact on the library program?

Methodology

Qualitative research techniques were selected for this study because they provide detailed descriptions of the impact of planned educational change (Herriot & Gross, 1979). A comparative case study was designed to examine the role school librarians played in the implementation of whole language, to provide practitioners with concrete examples of how library programs change when teachers begin to use whole language strategies in their classrooms, and to identify factors that affect the ability of librarians to support and implement change.

Sample and Population

The study took place in four elementary schools in a medium-size school district in central Virginia. The site was chosen for two reasons: (1) the school system has a history of successfully implementing planned educational change (Walsh, 1993), and (2) the school system received national recognition for its efforts to implement whole language (White et al., 1992).

Procedure

Data were collected over a four-month period the winter and spring of 1993. Data collection techniques included: (1) participant observation, (2) formal and informal interviews with librarians, (3) formal interviews with principals, (4) interviews with teachers at each school, and (5) the collection and examination of relevant documents.

Data analysis occurred in two phases. Each school was treated first as a comprehensive case in and of itself. The data from each school was then used to build categories and themes that conceptualized the data across the four cases, thus establishing the generality of the findings.

Findings

The findings presented here represent a summary of the data that were gathered and analyzed for this study. For a more in-depth discussion of the data, see *The Impact of Whole Language on Four Elementary Schools* (Hughes, 1998).

What changes occurred in the knowledge, perceptions, practices, and beliefs of these school librarians?

While each of the librarians believed in the theoretical principles of whole language, none of them felt they had enough knowledge about the philosophy to support teachers and students or to implement the philosophy in the library. They committed themselves to learn about the philosophy. They attended conferences, participated in workshops offered by the school system, read widely in the professional literature, and learned from the teachers in their buildings.

The librarians' efforts to learn about the philosophy enabled them to successfully implement whole language practices in the library. They used whole language strategies such as literature circles, story mapping, conferencing, mini-lessons, webbing, journaling, and modeling. The librarians organized their instruction so that the students learned from each other, as well as from them, and they encouraged students to reflect on what they had learned.

The librarians also realized that a cooperative relationship with teachers was no longer adequate—they needed to become active members of the instructional team. As one of them explained, "Whole language shows us that it's a group effort. We're all responsible for what our children learn and how they accomplish their tasks." The librarians energetically reached out to teachers by joining the school's leadership team, scheduling time to plan instruction with grade groups and individual teachers, and conducting professional development sessions for teachers.

In addition, it became evident to the librarians that internalization of the research process was crucial to student success—it could no longer be left to chance. They worked with teachers and students to learn how to develop essential questions, access prior knowledge, locate and evaluate print and nonprint resources, use specific note-taking strategies, and communicate their knew understandings.

What changes did the librarians make in the library programs as a result of whole language?

The four librarians in this study found that fixed library schedules interfered with the flow of learning and with equitable access to information. As one of them explained, "Whole language won't work if [the librarian] sees scheduled classes everyday. Teachers and kids need to be able to get in the library. [The librarian] needs to be able to work with teachers." Each of the librarians instituted a more flexible and open schedule that allowed students and teachers to use the library in many different ways: for individual reading and browsing, small group research, work on the computer, and whole class instruction.

The librarians also made changes to the physical layout and climate of the library. They created spaces for students to work independently, in small groups, and in large groups. There were comfortable reading areas—story blocks, rocking chairs, sofas, and even Clifford's Dog House. Emergent readers, beginning-to-read books, and transition novels were either shelved in separate areas of the collection or specially designated in the online catalog. Student work was displayed both inside the library and on the walls outside the library. And, as Calkins (1991) put it, the librarians made an increased effort to know the students' stories. They asked about their families and outside interests or hobbies, discussed books with them, and followed up on projects they had begun in the library and finished in their classrooms.

The librarians changed their approach to collection development as a result of whole language. As teachers began to teach differently, their needs for library materials changed. It was no longer enough for the library to provide supplementary materials. Teachers expected the library to provide instructional resources—trade books to support the "read to," "read

by," and "read with" components of the literacy program, and nonfiction tradebooks and other print and nonprint resources to support student learning in the content areas.

Students' information needs also changed as a result of whole language. As one librarian put it, "The kids became more demanding consumers." Students in kindergarten and first grade asked for books they could read independently. Students in the upper grades searched for specific titles and authors and browsed less. The amount and level of research also increased. Students in the primary grades conducted basic research. Students in the upper grades moved beyond simple fact-finding to interpreting, synthesizing, presenting, and evaluating new knowledge.

In response to these demands, the librarians shifted their focus from developing balanced collections to identifying the enacted curriculum and purchasing resources to support student learning in each curricular area. They purchased more nonfiction, especially nonfiction written at lower reading levels, science big books, and nonprint resources like videos, audiobooks, laser discs, and CD-ROMs to support student research needs.

They also purchased more resources to support literacy development—emergent readers, beginning-to-read books, transition novels, big books, and classroom sets of books. As one of them explained, "...I wasn't aware that I needed to be so careful in purchasing. I got what was out before, and now it's critical that I have things on all reading levels...particularly things on the lower end of reading levels."

The librarians also changed the selection tools they used to include journals like *Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*, *Booklinks*, and *The Web*—resources that are more thematically organized. In two of the schools collection development became a more collaborative process. Several teachers in these schools were children's literature experts. The librarians relied on these teachers to help select emergent readers, beginning-to-read books, and transition novels.

What role did the school librarians play during the implementation of the whole language philosophy?

The librarians in these four schools played two important roles during the implementation of whole language. First, they helped teachers understand and implement the philosophy in their classrooms by providing instructional and professional resources, modeling whole language practices in the library, and helping teachers develop problem-based research assignments.

Second, they used whole language as a springboard for implementing the vision for school library programs in *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (American Association of School Libraries & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1988).[1] It was clear to them that whole language and *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1988) were based on the same key theoretical principles and that a dynamic, student-centered library program was essential to authentic student learning.

[1] This study was conducted prior to revision of Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs.

In order to implement *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1988), the librarians became change agents. Two of them acted as enablers—change agents whose primary role is to provide encouragement and support to teachers as they implement an innovation (Grossner, 1973). The other two acted as catalysts—change agents whose primary responsibility is to upset the status quo and prod and pressure teachers to make changes (Shirk, 1978).

The level of success each librarian experienced varied and was dependent on five factors: (1) the culture of the school; (2) principal support; (3) the librarian's knowledge and interpersonal skills, (4) the librarian's reaction to district level changes, and (5) time.

Culture of the School

The librarians were most successful in schools where there was an already-existing collaborative and collegial culture among the faculty. In two of the schools, the faculty and staff were used to working in a host of cooperative ways. They spent time together "hammering out" what whole language meant to them, figuring out what it would look like in the classroom, and creating a shared vision for the school library program.

At the other two schools the teachers interacted in a friendly way, but there were tensions that prevented the librarians from implementing a more student-centered library program. At one school the tensions resulted from too much change too quickly—a new building and a new principal, increased enrollment accompanied by staff turnover, the adoption of whole language, and the introduction of site-based decision making. Teachers in this school needed support adjusting to these changes, not pressure to implement a new library program.

At the other school, the faculty worked cooperatively on many projects, but a small yet powerful group of them opposed the changes to the library program. Instead of working with the librarian to create a shared vision for the program, they engaged in turf battles over issues like who should decide how the library program functions, who owns the research process, and who knows more about children's literature.

Principal Support

All the major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that principal support strongly influences the likelihood of successful change. In these four schools, the principals understood the theoretical connection between whole language and effective library programs. They actively promoted the library program with their faculties, supported the change to flexible scheduling, encouraged teachers to plan with the librarian, and maintained or increased the level of funding for the library program. As one principal put it, "an effective whole language school is dependent on a quality school library program—one that is student-centered and promotes authentic learning."

Knowledge of the Librarian

Individuals matter in school reform. In these four schools, the knowledge and skill of the librarian were critical to the ability to implement an effective integrated library program.

Two of the librarians seemed intuitively to understand the change process. They realized that if they wanted teachers to accept a new vision for the school library program, they needed to focus on changing teachers' perceptions and beliefs, not just their behaviors. To do this, they engaged in power-sharing and formed advocacy groups. They involved opinion leaders in their schools in decisions about how the library program would function and what resources were needed. They also gave teachers time to adjust to changes in the library program. Rather than insisting that teachers immediately change the way they used the library, they met the teachers "where they were" and provided them with the level of assistance that would make them "happy with what they were doing."

The other two librarians were less knowledgeable about the change process, and as a result, experienced first-hand the frustration that internal change agents experience when they learn about the change process incidentally through trial and error. Both of them falsely assumed that if they made changes to the structure of the library program—that is, if they moved to flexible scheduling and implemented a formal process for collaborative planning—teachers would change their beliefs and attitudes about how the library program fit into the overall educational program. Both of them seemed unaware of the significance of power-sharing as a way to build trust and give teachers ownership in the change process. Each of them made key decisions about the library program that directly affected teachers and their students without involving them in the decision making process. In addition, they expected teachers to immediately change how they used the library—an unrealistic expectation that increased teacher resistance.

Librarians' Interpersonal Skills

According to Lippitt & Lippitt (1978), effective leaders must possess not only intellectual abilities and aptitudes, but they must also have personality characteristics that make it possible for them to work effectively with people. Two of the librarians had personalities that made them natural change agents. Teachers described them as "bubbly," "outgoing," friendly," and "energetic." Teachers perceived them to be patient, realistic, and empathetic. Teachers liked and trusted them.

The other two librarians, while certainly friendly, were more formal and business-like. The teachers at one school described the librarian as "inflexible" and "negative." At the other school, teachers perceived the librarian to be overwhelmed. They described her as "harried" and "running ragged."

District Level Changes

Changes in higher levels of the educational system affect the implementation of change at the school level. In 1992, the school board eliminated the central office media supervisor position and changed school board policy to allow schools to hire reading specialists to take on the responsibilities of school librarians. Librarians in the district believed these decisions showed how little the school board understood and valued the role of the school library program. Their beliefs were reinforced when several schools in the county used site-based

decision making to reduce funding, and in one case eliminate funding, for the school library program.

Two of the librarians reacted strongly to the school board's decisions. They were angry and worried that library programs were in danger of being eliminated. They felt isolated from the staff at central office and the decision-making process. Unfortunately, they brought their fear, anger, and resentment to their interactions with teachers. Teachers described these librarians as self serving, negative, and inflexible.

The other two, while not happy about the changes, saw them as a reason to become more proactive. They responded by joining the school's leadership team, attending additional professional development, and forming collaboartive relationships with key leaders in their school and at the central office.

Time

Change takes time. Individuals need time to learn about an innovation and how it will affect them; to adjust to new organizational structures, materials, skills, and methods; and to negotiate new roles and relationships (Hall & Hord, 1987). For two of the librarians time was an important factor in their success. The teachers at their schools were leaders in the whole language movement. As Hall & Hord predicted, they had moved beyond issues of management and organization to concerns about how whole language would impact student learning. They were ready to work collaboratively with other teachers, including the librarian, to implement additional instructional changes that would benefit students.

Teachers at the third school were still gathering information about whole language and determining how it would affect their classrooms. They were not yet ready to think about how their use of the library and their relationship with the librarian should change. Teachers at the fourth school were comfortable with whole language, but felt they did not have enough information about integrated library programs to embrace the change.

How do the school librarians feel about the whole language philosophy and its impact on the library program?

When the four librarians in this study heard that the school system planned to adopt the whole language philosophy they were excited and hopeful. One of them remembered thinking, "It's about time. They finally figured it out." They believed the implementation of whole language was exactly what librarians and libraries needed, that it would enable them to bridge the gap between the old view of the school library and the vision described in *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1988).

As implementation progressed, two of the librarians maintained their enthusiasm and optimism. At their schools, student and teacher use of the library increased, students became more excited and purposeful readers, teachers worked more collaboratively with them, the research process was taught K-5, and library instruction was tied directly to the classroom curriculum.

At the other two schools, the librarians became disappointed and discouraged. At their schools, despite their efforts, use of the library decreased, circulation dropped, and teachers became less willing to work with them than before. They attributed their difficulties to the increased size of classroom collections, the lack of support from central office staff, and a lack of district-wide professional development for teachers about the role of the library program in a whole language school.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show that school librarians are capable of being active participants in the implementation of whole language. The four librarians in this study openly embraced the principles of whole language and succeeded in integrating them into their instruction. They helped teachers in their efforts to understand and implement the philosophy by providing instructional and professional resources, modeling whole language practices in the library, and helping teachers develop problem-based research assignments. The findings also indicate that school librarians can use school reform efforts, like whole language, as a tool for implementing the national guidelines for effective library media programs. In order to be successful, however, they must be knowledgeable about the innovation, the change process, and the role of change agents.

Implications for Practitioners and Library Educators

The findings of this study suggest that school librarians must have an understanding of current research on teaching and learning and the factors that affect successful implementation of change. They must assess their ability to function as change agents. They must ensure that they have the knowledge, leadership skills, attitude, and personality to guide the change process effectively. They must understand how to engage in power sharing and form advocacy groups, and they must anticipate resistance to change and develop strategies for overcoming this resistance. They must also attend professional development opportunities with teachers. Teachers must view the librarians as partners in the change process and perceive them as knowledgeable about instructional innovations. Lastly, librarians must advocate for school library programs, not by demanding or expecting changes, but by actively and thoughtfully entering the educational dialogue. This means listening carefully and with an open mind to teachers' concerns and questions, knowing how and when to communicate, and knowing from whom to seek support.

Library educators must provide opportunities for pre-service librarians to learn about educational change and current research on teaching and learning. In addition, they must provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively with teachers prior to entering the field. Courses such as resources for children and young adults, the instructional role of the library media specialist, and web design lend themselves to collaborative efforts both with practicing and pre-service teachers.

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